

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Mary and Colin are often described as being unpleasant and rude. Martha, in fact, says Mary is "as tyrannical as a pig" and that Colin is the "worst young newt as ever was." Why are both of these children so ill-tempered? Whom does Burnett hold responsible for their behavior--themselves or their parents? How does this fit into one of the larger themes of the novel, that of the "fallen world of adults"?
2. Why does Mary respond so well to Martha? What characteristics of Martha's personality are responsible for awakening the gentleness hidden in Mary? Compare Martha's treatment of Mary to Mary's treatment of Colin. Does it have the same effect on Colin as it does on Mary?
3. Upon Mary's first encounter with Dickon, Burnett describes the boy in this way: "His speech was so quick and easy. It sounded as if he liked her and was not the least afraid she would not like him, though he was a common moor boy, in patched clothes and with a funny face and a rough, rusty-red head. As she came closer to him she noticed that there was a clean fresh scent of heather and grass and leaves about him, almost as if he were made of them." What is significant about this passage? Are there any particular motifs that seem to be connected specifically to Dickon?
4. Compare Dickon's upbringing with Mary's and Colin's. How is it different? Is it important, or just incidental, that Dickon is a "common moor boy" rather than a member of the "privileged class"?
5. Could Mary and Colin have found the path to spiritual and physical healing without Dickon?
6. Is Colin's deceased mother's spirit present in the book? Where and when do you sense it the most? Who does she employ as her "agents" of goodwill in the book?
7. Misselthwaite Manor is a house of masculine rule, whether it be Mr. Craven's or Colin's rule. The garden, however, is a place of fertility and regrowth. This type of symbolism structures the novel. Where else is this structure manifested in the novel?
8. In its theme of the mind's potential for regeneration, *The Secret Garden* has often been considered a tribute to the "New Thought" movement, which included ideas of Christian Science and Theosophy. How do you feel about this? Do you think that the "magic" employed by Colin was as crucial to his healing as was communion with nature and other living things?
Discuss the regionalist aspects of the novel, such as the Yorkshire dialects. How do they contribute to the overarching themes of *The Secret Garden*?
9. In your opinion, does Mr. Craven, after subjecting his son to years of neglect, deserve redemption?
10. Which narrative features were employed by the author to make *The Secret Garden* speak to children? Why does this novel appeal to an adult audience as well? What makes it a classic?
11. Discuss the regionalist aspects of the novel, such as the Yorkshire dialects. How do they contribute to the overarching themes of *The Secret Garden*?

ABOUT FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT

Frances Eliza Hodgson was born on November 24, 1849, in Manchester, England, the third of Edwin Hodgson's and Eliza Boond's five children. Her father ran a prosperous firm which specialized in the trade of decorative arts for the interiors of houses. At the time, Manchester was experiencing a textile boom which infused the town with a rising middle-class, and because these families were erecting magnificent houses, Hodgson's merchandise was in demand.



The prosperity of the Hodgson family was cut short in 1854 when Edwin suffered a stroke. Even more devastating to the family fortune was the American Civil War, which caused a cessation of cotton shipments from Southern plantations, crippling Manchester's economy. Eliza Hodgson decided to emigrate to America, and in 1865, when Burnett was sixteen, the family settled in a small town about twenty-five miles from Knoxville, Tennessee. This move would prove instrumental in Burnett's development as a writer. Although she had always been obsessed with storytelling and often amused her schoolmates by acting out tales of

adventure and romance, the financial strain of the emigration caused her to turn to writing as a means of supplementing the family's income. The move from industrial England to rural America was for the family a journey to the green, natural world that would become a central theme in many of Burnett's later works, including *The Secret Garden*.

Burnett's first published story, "Miss Carruthers' Engagement," appeared in a magazine called Godey's Lady's Book in 1868. After the death of her mother in 1872, the family became increasingly dependent on her writing income. She accelerated her career as a popular writer and sold stories to many magazines. In September of 1873 she married Swann Burnett, a doctor from Tennessee who was preparing to specialize in the treatment of the eye and ear. He wished to further his specialty by studying in Europe, and Burnett financed his wish, once again becoming responsible for the bulk of her family's income.

In 1874, she gave birth to her son Lionel and began work on her first major novel, *The Lass o' Lowries*. The critical response was encouraging, and many reviews compared Burnett's work to that of Charlotte Brontë and Henry James. In 1879 she published her novel *Haworth*, her first attempt at serious fiction. Later that same year, one of her first children's stories appeared in *St. Nicholas*, a magazine in which she would publish for years to come. It is at this time that Burnett, who was constantly battling illness, acquainted herself with the philosophies of Spiritualism, Theosophy, Mind Healing, and Christian Science. These philosophies' ideas

about the healing powers of the mind became a crucial motif in much of her writing, most notably in *A Little Princess*, *The Secret Garden*, and *The Lost Prince*.

In 1886 *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, the book that transformed Burnett's life, was published. It became a runaway bestseller in America and England. While the success of the book branded Burnett a popular and romantic writer rather than a serious artist, it provided her with enough income to free her from an unhappy marriage and allow her to travel through Europe. In 1890 Burnett's first son Lionel died of consumption. By 1898, Burnett and Swann divorced by mutual consent, and she leased a country house in England where she immersed herself in her passion for gardening. The estate was surrounded by several walled gardens, one of which, a rose garden, served as her outdoor workroom. It was here that the idea of *The Secret Garden* was born.

Over the course of her life, Burnett wrote more than forty books, for both adults and children. While her adult novels are considered to be quite sentimental, her children's books have withstood the fickleness of literary fashions. Frances Hodgson Burnett died of congestive heart failure on October 29, 1924.

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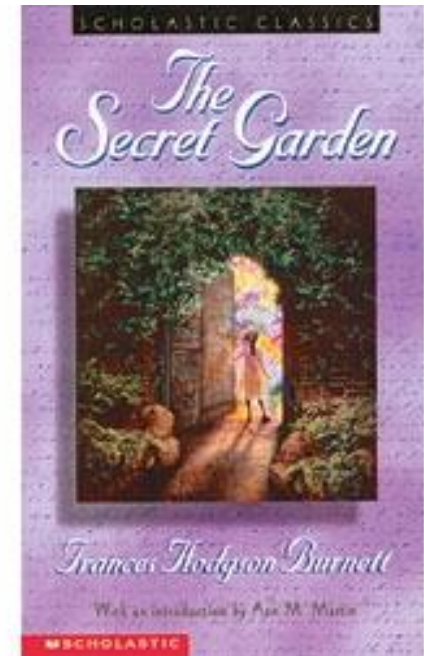
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